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THE INEXPLICABLE GERMAN IDEA

BY PHILIP MARSHALL BROWN

MAXIMILIAN HARDEN, the great German journalist, is credited with the statement that neutral opinion is largely hostile to Germany in the present war, not because the neutral nations have not been told the truth, but "because they do not think as we Germans think." This profound observation would seem to afford the only just criterion of the acts and beliefs of Germans both within and without the German Empire at this momentous time. It should lead all fair-minded men, who can divest themselves of bias and prejudice, to endeavor to ascertain just what Germans *do* think.

There are two aspects of this question, one negative, and the other positive. First of all we must recognize a great defect of a great German virtue, namely, that the loyalty of a German forbids his thinking ill of the Fatherland. Since this war began, it has been apparent that the magnificent response of the German people the world over to the call of the Fatherland included implicit faith in the lofty motives, methods, and views of the Kaiser and his Government. Public opinion, intellectual leaders, private judgments, have all been mobilized in behalf of the Empire. It has therefore been almost impossible for any German to entertain for a moment the suggestion of a critical judgment of the acts and views of his Government. "The war was forced on Germany." "Belgium was not neutral." "The charges of atrocities by German soldiers are calumnious." "The deportation of Belgians is a humane measure intended for their own good." Thus speaks the loyal German who by temperament is unable to believe ill of his Fatherland. As well ask a lover to think ill of his sweetheart!

So much for the negative side of the German mental attitude. It is of profound significance, but we are particu-

larly concerned to ascertain just what Germans positively believe. What, in sum, is the "German Idea" of which we hear so much?

A most interesting answer to this question is to be found in *German World Policies*, by Doctor Paul Rohrbach, who "has been for several years the most popular author of books on politics and economics in Germany," says the translator, Dr. Edmund Von Mach. It is unfair to quote any writer, whether it be Bernhardt, Lamb, Usher, Lea, or Rohrbach, as an authoritative representative of his country. It is not unfair, however, to compare such private views with the general views of a nation as reflected in its press and especially in its acts. When a man expresses what most of his countrymen are thinking, and what his country is actually attempting to accomplish, he may be considered fairly representative.

Read in this light, Rohrbach's book is of more than ordinary interest. With great candor he attempts to set forth the mission of "The German Idea in the World"—to quote the original title of the book as it first appeared, in 1912. Not only does he make clear what Germans are thinking about, but he reveals the *way* they think. One is made to realize the truth of Harden's statement that they do not think as men of other nationalities think. Their mental processes are distinct in certain respects, at least as concerns their major premises.

The major premise, the main thesis of Doctor Rohrbach, which has evidently been generally accepted by his fellow-countrymen, is best set forth in his own words:

We start very consciously with the conviction that we have been placed in the arena of the world in order to work out moral perfection, not only for ourselves, but for all mankind. (p. 4.)

Rome had to be the mistress of the world before she could determine the political and legal thoughts of future generations.

It is not necessary to claim for the German idea that it will exist like the Roman either as the mistress of the world or not at all, but it is right to say that it will exist only as the co-mistress of the culture of the world, or it will not exist at all. The Anglo-Saxons have spread over such vast expanses that they seem to be on the point of assuming the cultural control of the world, thanks to their large numbers, their resources, and their inborn strength. (p. 5.)

The German nation is the only one which has sufficiently developed by the side of the Anglo-Saxons, and is, moreover, numeri-

cally and inherently strong enough to claim for its national idea the right to participate in the shaping of the world which is to be. (p. 6.)

This is the *leit motif* that constantly sounds throughout the whole of this remarkable book: the German challenge of Anglo-Saxon influence throughout the world. It is the first, the fundamental, and the final article of Rohrbach's creed. To be sure, the exact nature of the "German idea" which is to challenge the control of the world is never defined with any precision. One must draw his own conclusions by a process of elimination. This "idea" is certainly not religious in character. The religious propaganda of British and American missionaries in various lands is regarded by Rohrbach, not as the advancement of Christianity, but as the means for the advancement of British and American "cultures"! There is no suggestion whatever of the duty of Germans to sacrifice anything for the triumph of Christianity throughout the world. The main object must always be the triumph of the "German idea."

Nor is this "idea" international in character and purpose. There is no supreme obligation to labor for the cause of internationalism, for the better mutual understanding of nations. Not at all. The supreme end is the domination of the "German idea." German nationalism or *Kultur* is of superior value to internationalism!

There is a frank disavowal by Rohrbach of any political benefit to the world through the "German idea." On the contrary, he admits that "we cannot deny that our public institutions give occasional evidences of political backwardness even to those who view them in a spirit of moderation." (p. 216.) Referring to the suggestion of certain Chinese reformers to introduce the Prussian constitutional régime into China, he observes: "Theoretically many things may be said in favor of such a system for a community like China; actually, however, a reform which was intended to advance freedom could not have been proclaimed more inauspiciously even in China than by basing it on a system which everywhere else in the world was regarded as reactionary." (p. 217.) And he concluded his observations on this most important question by saying: "Since even Bismarck in his masterful way adopted at home the principle of freedom for the sake of the respect which it would win for the Empire

abroad, we might well learn how wise and useful it would be if we permitted a new spirit to transform our national life today in a way which would strengthen us at home and be unfailingly effective abroad." (p. 219.) From these extraordinarily candid statements it may be seen that the "German idea" is not concerned with the high mission of advancing the political freedom of the world.

Curiously enough, there is no suggestion in Rohrbach's book, even, of the purely intellectual mission of the "German idea" to stimulate and revivify the world. There is no apparent message in the realm of thought and intellectual processes to be spread among the nations.

The mission of this "German idea," therefore, would appear to be neither religious, international, political, nor intellectual in character. What, then, has it specifically to offer to the world? Little more, it would seem from Doctor Rohrbach's exposition, than the incidental efficiency and powers of organization which would necessarily accompany the extension of German aims throughout the world. Whatever the aspirations and objects of German foreign policy, it is bound to embody the "German idea," and therefore to deserve the support of all loyal Germans. It is most unfortunate; but the "German idea" does not emerge in any clear terms. It is magnificently vague and portentous.

The next point to be considered is: How can this "idea" be most efficiently propagated? What are the agencies to be employed? Here, in all fairness, it should at once be noted that Rohrbach specifically affirms:

The policy of the German idea in the world, therefore, does not contemplate, according to our view, any conquest or violence. If it did this, it might count more readily on the sympathy of the masses. But since we cannot travel this road, both for ideal and material reasons, our task is this: We must realize the idea of national expansion, on which our ability to exist as a nation of the first rank depends, by making ourselves in the first place so strong on land and sea that nobody will dare attack us, and secondly by working thus protected for the attainment of our pacific aim. This aim is to permeate the world with the spiritual contents of our national idea. (p. 204.)

We are thus assured that neither conquest nor violence is contemplated "to realize the idea of national expansion." The permeation of the world "with the spiritual contents

of our national idea " is to be a moral conquest, not a victory by sheer force of arms. But we are here confronted by a dilemma created by Doctor Rohrbach in his candid admission that " the complete estrangement between us and our nearest relatives, the Swiss and the Dutch, is explained by our inability to make moral conquests, and that the North German character is most to blame. It is incapable of freely understanding the moods of other nations and of living in friendly harmony with other people. " (p. 221.) What an astounding admission of a painful truth long known to other nations! It is all too true that Germany has been unable to understand others and live in friendly harmony with her neighbors. Its distrust and hatred of other nations has long been apparent. Diplomacy under such appalling conditions has been utterly hopeless. War alone could result from such a frenzied state of affairs. And yet, according to Rohrbach, violence is not contemplated! Though the Germans *are unable to make moral conquests*, the " German idea " is to achieve a spiritual or moral conquest.

How, then, is the " German idea " to be propagated if not by physical or moral conquest? Rohrbach says " it can only live and increase if its material foundations, viz., the number of Germans, the prosperity of Germany, and the number and size of our world-interests, continue to increase. " (p. 8.) Here we have the frank admission of the materialism of the " German idea. " It is not leaven to permeate and change the world by its own inherent worth. It needs large numbers of Germans, great commerce, merchant ships, colonies, armies, and battleships. Of course it is urged that all these things are to be employed peacefully in self-defense. And yet the diplomatic history of Europe for the past fifteen years shows that Germany has rattled the sabre on several occasions to warn other nations that they must choose between the alternatives of permitting the achievement of German aims, or accepting war. Witness Tangier, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia, and Agadir. Such, at least, would seem to be the diplomatic significance to Germany of arms and ships for self-defense: " If we are strong enough Europe will never dare refuse our demands. " The tragic aspect of this point of view is the fact that England, in the eyes of Germany, has long been the great antagonist with whom it might be necessary at

any moment to measure arms. This *leit motif* of the challenge of the "German idea" to share with England the dominion of the world must always be remembered.

This ever present *arrière pensée* of the moral value of force appears most clearly with reference to the subject of colonies, which Rohrbach as a colonial expert holds to be of the greatest importance as the foundation of world-empire. Germany must needs expand. At whose expense? This is by no means clear. One has to remain satisfied with statements of the following character: "It is not our intention to rob anybody, but one need not be a prophet, as matters are today (1912), to foretell that the final drawing of lines between the African colonies is yet to come, and that it will be our duty to create a much larger African Germany before this time arrives." (p. 134.)

Another great source of strength for the "German idea" is to be found, according to Rohrbach, in the allegiance of Germans living outside of the Fatherland and the colonies. He asks this strange question: "Is there another nation in the world whose Government would have been willing through forty years to let hundreds of thousands of fellow-countrymen living in foreign lands lose their nationality simply because it could not find a formula by which they might be retained?" (p. 63.) Curiously enough, that "formula" has evidently been found in the German nationality law of 1913 which permits a German citizen—according to a speech by Dr. Delbrueck in the Reichstag—to acquire, "side by side with his old nationality, a new nationality, the possession of which would still allow of his usefully representing the interests of his old Fatherland."

It would be superfluous to stress the need felt by Germany of a great army and navy to defend and spread the "German idea." The burden of armament which Germany imposed on herself as well as on the rest of Europe, and the ghastly results of that rivalry in armament, are all too vividly before our eyes. It is sufficient merely to note the existence of this German conviction that physical force is the backbone of the "German idea." Incapable of making moral conquests, as Rohrbach himself admits, Germany must rely on commerce, men, arms, and ships.

Such, in brief, are the main outlines of the "German idea," and the chief characteristics of German processes of thought concerning the foreign policy of Germany, as pre-

sented by Doctor Rohrbach. Tested by subsequent events, his views would seem to be fairly representative of those of his fellow-countrymen. Is not Harden profoundly right when he affirms that peoples of other nations do not think as Germans think? Must this not afford the only just criterion for judging Germany and Germans the world over at this juncture? If they indeed believe in the sacred mission of Germany "to exist only as the co-mistress of the culture of the world," is it to be wondered that Europe finds itself plunged into the present conflict?

When one realizes the wealth of Germany's peaceful contributions to the world in literature, music, philosophy, science, and general efficiency; when he remembers all that is inspiring in German life; when he recalls with tenderness cherished German associations and friendships, it is profoundly depressing to contemplate the actual situation, namely, the avowed intention of Germany to impress her *Kultur* on the rest of the world by force of arms. This is obviously gross materialism—this belief in the forceful propagation of ideas. It is evidence of spiritual, as well as of intellectual, bankruptcy. In the individual it would unmistakably indicate the need of a great misfortune, a trial by fire, a bitter experience, to bring him back to his normal senses. When this benign calamity befalls a man, though his friends may confidently await a happy result, it is hard for them to witness his ravings, his agonies, his utter humiliation. How terrible it is to behold a whole nation in such a state, swayed by a mad obsession! The only hope for itself, as well as for the rest of the world, must lie in the possibility of a great moral awakening, a spiritual regeneration which shall find its practical expression in a political revolution. The contest now being waged in defense of democratic ideals thus becomes also a contest to give Germany true freedom.

Until such a momentous revolution shall take place in German thought, the rest of the world must perforce adopt an attitude of resistance. As long as the German sword is lifted against all other national "cultures," so long will Germany find herself isolated, encircled, embattled, and held at bay. The issue cannot be allowed to rest in doubt; it is too vast, too vital. It is the cause of human freedom throughout the world.

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